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TAGS: PREL PTER PGOV CE

SUBJECT: MUSLIM MINISTER SAYS PRESIDENT WAVERING ON
DEVOULATION PROPOSAL

Classified By: Ambassador Robert O. Blake, Jr. for reasons
1.4 (b) and (d).

¶11. (C) On March 4 Ambassador paid an initial courtesy call on the President of the Sri Lanka Muslim Council (SLMC) Rauff Hakeem in his new capacity as SL Minister of Posts and Telecommunications. After a brief discussion on his new portfolio which Hakeem admitted he was still learning about, Ambassador shifted the focus to the important role the Minister plays as one of two key Muslim ministers who are committed to a strong devolution proposal.

¶12. (C) Hakeem admitted frankly to the Ambassador that he was concerned that the President remains non-committal about embracing a strong power sharing proposal. He said he had two long discussions with the President during the President's visit to China the preceding week. The President admitted to him that he is concerned about embracing a forward-looking devolution proposal for fear that the LTTE will reject it, exposing the President to criticism from his southern base. Ambassador commented that if the LTTE refuses to negotiate then other options should be explored, including finding moderate Tamils in Sri Lanka and India with whom the government can work to fashion a devolution proposal that will meet the aspirations of Sri Lanka's Tamil and other communities. Hakeem agreed.

¶13. (C) Hakeem thanked the Ambassador for his public comments on several occasions urging the All Parties Representative Committee to adopt a devolution proposal that exceeds in scope the proposal put forward by then President Kumaratunga in the year 2000. Hakeem said this mirrored exactly the advice he had been giving to the President and other influential ministers and that he had used the Ambassador's comments to stress the importance that the

international community attaches to a strong devolution proposal.

¶4. (C) Turning to the difficult situation in Batticaloa, Hakeem inquired about the Ambassador's recovery from the February 27 LTTE mortar attack and thanked him for his public comments on the need for the government to rein in Karuna and reassert government control over law and order in the east. As a sitting member of parliament from a district in the east (Ampara), Hakeem said he had received numerous complaints from Muslim and other residents about the increasingly blatant and illegal activities of the Karuna group in the east. He recounted the example of a religious leader who had come in to see him the day before to complain about Karuna. The leader had first sought the protection and intervention of local police forces but the police told him they were powerless to take action because of orders from superiors in Colombo not to interfere with Karuna.

¶5. (C) Ambassador urged Hakeem to work with reform-minded ministers from the ruling SLFP party and the UNP crossover ministers to maintain pressure within the All Parties Representative Committee for a substantial devolution proposal that exceeded the Kumaratunga proposal of 2000. Hakeem responded that he was doing so, but expressed disappointment that many of the UNP crossovers were not interested in making waves now that they had received ministerial jobs and all the associated perquisites.

BLAKE